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Deposited in DRO:

02 February 2010

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Not peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Tolia-Kelly, Divya P. and Nesbitt, Claire. (2009) 'An archaeology of race : exploring the northern frontier in Roman Britain (exhibition catalogue).', Durham: Divya Tolia-Kelly and Claire Nesbitt.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://www.dur.ac.uk/geography/race/>

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An archaeology of 'race'

Exploring the northern frontier in Roman Britain

Divya P Tolia-Kelly
Claire Nesbitt

introduction by **Michael A Crang**





Lucius Septimius Severus
emperor AD 193–211



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The Severan Tondo, dating from around AD 200. Septimius Severus is shown with his wife, Julia Domna, and their sons, Geta and Caracalla. Geta's face has been removed, probably after he was murdered by his brother Caracalla

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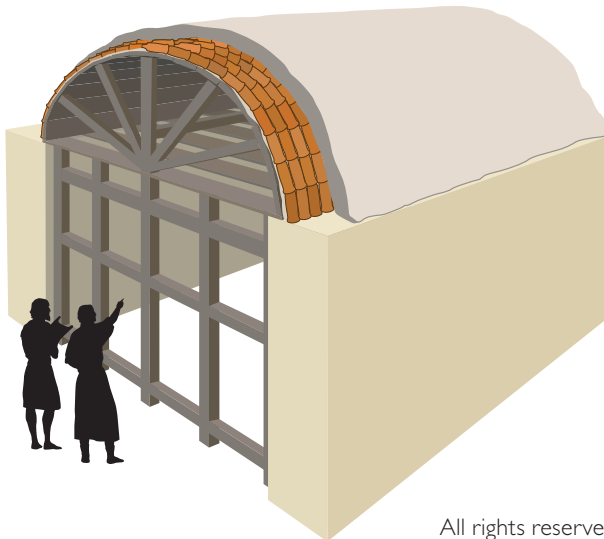
published 2009

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printing Alphagraphics www.agnortheast.com

This publication has been generously funded by Durham University's
Department of Geography's Internationalization Research Fund
and the Lived and Material Cultures Research Cluster



**Vaulting tubes – an African building technique
used on the northern frontier**

© Christina Unwin

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World heritage and world heritages

Dr Michael A Crang Geography, Durham University

If, as the old definition goes, history is what can be remembered, then for many of us who learnt about Hadrian's Wall and the Roman empire at school it symbolizes the edge of civilization and a series of questions about wearing togas in inclement weather.

That might be funnier if it did not sum up the role the Wall has often played in popular histories and imaginings of especially English history. From the Victorian period, the Romans were co-opted as imperial civilizing progenitors of the British, where 'Pax Romana' within the territory bounded on the north by the Wall was to be succeeded by 'Pax Britannica'. The Wall placed England on the right side of the history of civilization that saw the inheritance of classical values and virtues then mobilized by a triumphant British state. The Wall then acted as a symbol of exclusion and inheritance.

This exhibition unsettles some of these traditions of symbolism about the Wall. The wall was garrisoned not by toga-draped Latin speakers but by a polyglot mix of recruits drawn from around the Roman world. The Roman empire served to allow people, things and ideas to move over great areas and mingle in new combinations. Near Eastern religions from the cult of Mithras to Christianity were brought to the region, while classical gods were fused with local ones. Far from the empty rural and isolated landscape we now see, the military zone of the Wall was an area of thriving activity, economic and cultural innovation and pluralism. The project shown here illustrates how we

can see the evidence and effects of this mixture and change in things like food and farming.

The different food preferences noted here show that there were specific different diets brought from the Mediterranean and from Romania. To sustain these diets, the Roman occupation probably introduced animals such as the brown hare and pheasant, and plants like cabbages and leeks. These are now so closely associated with the British landscape that they are thought of as 'natives'.

In the long history of the Roman occupation, many men in foreign military units undoubtedly also settled, retired and made homes here, with their descendents living locally and being in turn recruited into units originally from far afield.

The innovative Tales of the Frontier Project – created by leading scholars from Durham University, supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and collaborating with Tyne and Wear Museums and Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery – suggests that Hadrian's Wall is truly a World Heritage Site, in that here we can find a symbol of a heritage of circulation and mixture where the wider world came to these shores.

The example of Septimius Severus reminds us that current national, cultural and regional divisions are often relatively recent and by no means natural. The shores of Africa, the forests of Bavaria, the mountains of the Balkans and the plains of Iberia all contributed to the functioning of the Wall. The history of the Wall is not just about keeping people out – but about bringing so many people and things in.

An archaeology of 'race'

Mobilities, race and materials of British heritage

Dr Divya Praful Tolia-Kelly Geography, Durham University

People and territories themselves are in constant motion, and have been since the early splitting of the continent of Pangea. The geological landscape is on the move, as are we folk who reside upon it. This essay explores the nexus point at which the migration and mobilities of people meet, and how this flow of people has been driven by the imperial imperatives to man, to secure and extend the Roman imperial state territories and wealth.

These movements across the territories of Roman control have resulted in a history of the northern frontier being one of multiple cultures and languages; of Mediterranean, African and Eastern European influence and presence; and a colourful everyday life which is normally encountered at the location of an 'exotic' landscape. This landscape of the northern frontier, where a diverse collage of cultures, peoples and natures is embedded in the soil and material cultures of Hadrian's Wall, is represented in the panels and curatorship of *An archaeology of 'race'*. These material cultures act as imprints on the northern frontier landscape and move us to consider 'What is Englishness?', 'What is "British" national identity?' and 'How does the body politic of the nation reflect all of its histories?' These are questions to be debated within the museum space through historical, archaeological and geographical scholarship, material artefacts and beyond.

Race

As I write this essay in the spring of 2009, there are several media news stories about the recent European Parliamentary Elections and the marked increase in the share of votes given to nationalists, fascists and national independence parties across Europe. 'Race', 'identity' and 'citizenship' are at stake in the current public debates and are embedded in allegiances to State, Crown, land and territory. There is, for a minority population, an air of insecurity, of fear, terror and protectionism about borders, citizens and national cultures. A memory of European and international histories based on continual flux and mobilities of peoples, cultures and natures has unevenly faded. Unfounded beliefs about the fixed nature of nations, notions of genetic identities, and bonds to soil and blood lines are presented. This is a moment of pause and reflection on the very notion of nation and national culture and the ways in which heritage and histories are written, displayed and performed in the public sphere.

The aim of this exhibition, *An archaeology of 'race'*, has been to demythologize the northern frontier, namely that between Wallsend and Carlisle, as a space of homogeneous English folk, shielded from flows of populations and cultural influence. Through the commissioning of scholars and material artifacts, *An archaeology of 'race'* explores the nature of 'race'

in Roman times and the mobilities of people, cultures and natures which formed the very foundations of 'Britishness' within Roman Britain. Movement, trans-territorial rule and a notion of State centred on citizenship was at the heart of the strength of governance within imperial Rome and the Roman emperor's rule of Britain.

Material culture

Material cultures operate in the museum space as a remnant of past times on the frontier, namely as 'evidence' for historical narratives of the frontier and its people. These forms of material culture are usually relegated to 'ethnographic' status in museum displays, secondary to the elite modes of busts, architectural finery and religious iconography. In this exhibition, they effectively direct the narrative history of the museum towards the stories of lives not normally encountered.

The lead seals, vaulting tubes, brooches, roof tiles, bricks, coins, spoons, knives, cooking utensils and tombstones all provide evidence of cultural contact and exchange at the frontier. The stamps on the roof tiles evidence peoples from Gaul (modern-day France) and Germania; the brooch, peoples from Romania; to name but a few. African emperor Septimius Severus' household too has left materials from his stay at South Shields and, in turn, York – the seals normally used to seal luggage and prevent tampering. These seals date from AD 209, two years prior to his death. The coin in the cabinet with the bust of Septimius Severus was minted in Rome and has been found in South Shields at Arbeia.

My own interest was inspired by Severus's birth in Libya and the journey of a man, of modest family, to military strategist and imperial ruler. This journey was highlighted at the British Museum's 'Views from Africa'

exhibition in 2005. In response to the statue of Severus, one visitor stated, "At last, the African presence in ancient Britain is being acknowledged".

The museum narration of a fuller history of Roman Britain that includes the legacy of the lives of 'non-natives', 'others' or, indeed, citizens of Roman Britain, is an important part of British history, in order to counter mythologies or at least to allow for a genealogical set of historical narratives.

The formal recording of 'foreign' presence is indicated through the *Notitia Dignatatum* (a record of the administrative organization of the Roman empire) and artefacts such as fragments of pottery made by native ('British') potters for an African market. At Wallsend, a piece of pottery from the early 3rd century AD is identified as a fragment of a casserole dish, made in Britain, that was copied from a type originally made in North Africa. It included in its form a charcoal-burning brazier. This demonstrates North African cooking influences in the North of England in the Roman period.

Romance is here too on the frontier, in the form of the tombstones of Titullinia (exhibited at Tullie House) and Regina. Regina's tombstone was inscribed by her husband Barates. It indicates the life of the two lovers coming to the northern frontier to live and love after 'home counties' Regina is freed from slavery by her 'foreign' mate. The tombstone of Titullinia shows that she too was loved and that she was the celebrated wife of an ordinary soldier or native merchant. Titullinia came from Raetia, which is the area now occupied by southeast Germany, Austria and the southwest Czech Republic.

Romance is also in the biographies of the folk whose bodies are buried on the frontier, such as the tombstone of Saturninus, from the 3rd century AD. He was a soldier from Hippo Regius, a town on the northwest coast of the Roman-ruled province of Africa.

This North-African soldier died while serving with his unit which was stationed on Hadrian's Wall. Saturninus journeyed across the empire to arrive at the farthest outpost at the northern edge of 'civilization'.

The native food and climate in the North were not deemed welcoming to many of the 'foreign' residents of the Roman empire, as is shown in the Vindolanda tablets held at the British Museum.

An archaeology of 'race' to some degree unravels the familiar and consolidated image of 'Romans' and the 'imperial military' as being a homogeneous culture and population. These narratives have often reflected sanctioned views of many sectors, including the British State, tourism agencies, scholars, antiquarians, historians and anthropologists that have in the past been shaped by Britain's own imperial project. Here, 'race' had a very different place in society. The British empire made distinctions between capacities of people and their cultures based on an environmental determinism. North Africa was more likely to be the site of the 'uncivilized savage' rather than the location

of one of Rome's greatest cities, Leptis Magna, and the birthplace of a great African military strategist, Emperor Lucius Septimius Severus.

Heritage landscapes in the 21st century

In visiting the landscape of the northern frontier we can explore the views of country, nature and military architectures as Hadrian envisioned them, or as Severus rebuilt them. At one time, the landscape was named as 'Severus' Wall', with Severus highlighted as the builder of the wall – it is now Hadrian's.

The landscape has not changed distinctly, but it is neither unmoving nor monumentally fixed; its history is like the lives of Severus, Hadrian, Victor, Saturninus, and Regina. The landscape is dynamic, mutable and with varying versions of its biography. This exhibition has a biography of its own which has sought to highlight 'race', 'citizenship' and 'identity' on the northern frontier through objects and images.

In the twenty-first century, however, writing, coins, knives and tombstones have a very different place in the telling of history. Today's everyday histories are woven into the energetic flows of the 'inter-web', where data is ephemeral, malleable and intangible.

This exhibition is also a thinking space for working out what and how a future 'archaeology' of the frontier landscape will be encountered. What situation can museum archaeology appropriate where bricks and mortar are secondary to imprints in the form of artful and cultural e-communications? Also, what sort of British heritage can be embraced in a society where globalization is at its height, but where possibly public national imaginings are shrinking and becoming



Tombstone of Saturninus

© Tullie House Museum & Art Gallery

defensive of parochial understandings of past lives, peoples and places, despite our very international biological, geological and cultural roots?

Acknowledgements

My thanks for exemplary intellectual and practical support to Mike Crang, Claire Nesbitt and Christina Unwin.

It is also most important to declare that without Alex Croom, Tim Padley and Geoff Woodward there would be no exhibition – thanks for your vision and faith.

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The tombstone of Regina provides early evidence of an interracial marriage. Regina was a slave until she was given her freedom and married Barates, a Syrian. Her tombstone suggests that she was a native Briton, identifying herself as Catuvellauni, from the Hertfordshire region

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**Tombstone of Victor, a Moor
and a freedman, who acquired
his citizenship as a gift from
Numerianus, his master**

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Race and citizenship

Dr Claire Nesbitt Archaeology, Durham University

The exhibition *An archaeology of 'race'* draws out the stories of foreign people who occupied the region of Hadrian's Wall in the Roman period and reveals a much richer, more diverse cultural heritage for the region than is generally thought. Examples of foreign individuals who rose through the ranks of Roman society indicate that social standing and citizenship were much more significant factors in the struggle for acceptance in the Roman world than race.

'Race' is the classification of people through their physical or biological features. Race becomes racism when variability in outward appearance is thought to correlate with other characteristics such as intelligence or moral character.

There has been much speculation about attitudes to race in the ancient world. Isaacs has argued for the development of 'proto-racism' in the ancient world, based on his reading of ancient sources; others have considered the Romans to be colour blind, not discriminating against foreign peoples on the basis of their appearance. The attitude of Roman society to other peoples focused more on civilization and citizenship.

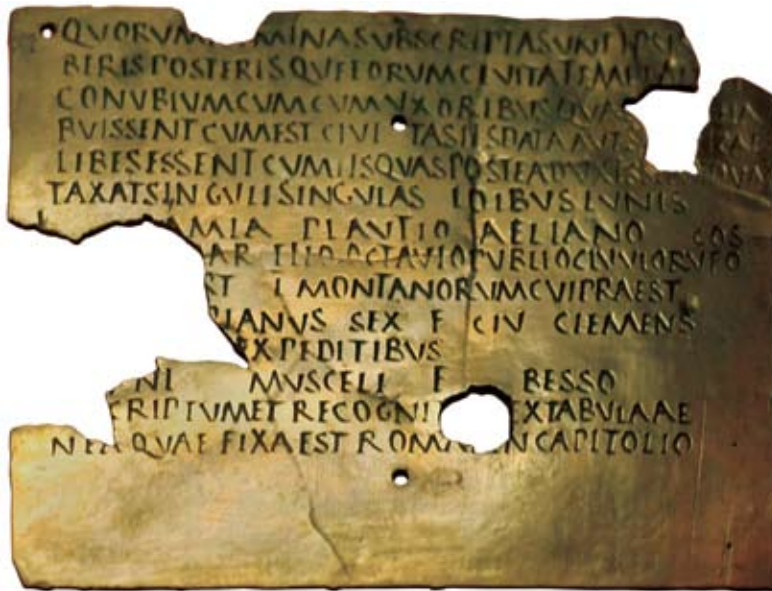
Citizenship was a crucial part of Romanness or 'Romanitas'; being a Roman citizen ('Civis Romanus') meant belonging to the Roman State, and it entailed certain rights and privileges. Citizenship, however, was a complex concept; there were several different levels of citizenship and these are not always clearly defined. Full Roman citizens ('Cives Romani') were fully

protected by Roman law ('ius civile'). These citizens were divided into two classes, those who had the right to hold property ('ius commercii') and to marry ('ius connubii'), and those who held these rights and an additional right to vote ('ius suffragiorum') and hold office ('ius honorum').

One of the best examples of the importance of citizenship can be drawn from Christian scripture. The Acts of the Apostles in the Bible describes the events that unfolded when Paul, one of Jesus' followers and an early Christian missionary, was preaching in Jerusalem. Paul was arrested by the Roman authorities because Christianity was forbidden in the Roman empire. This monotheistic doctrine – which did not recognize the divinity of the Roman emperor, and the Lord's Prayer, which looked for a new kingdom, the kingdom of God – challenged the supremacy and indeed the stability of the Roman empire. Consequently, Paul was to be detained and flogged for breaking the law. Paul's father had been a Roman citizen and Paul inherited this status. This posed a problem for his captors:

But when they tied him up for the lash, Paul said to the centurion who was standing there, "Can you legally flog a man who is a Roman citizen, and moreover has not been found guilty?" When the centurion heard this, he went and reported it to the commandant. "What do you mean me to do?" he said. "This man is a Roman citizen." The commandant came to Paul. "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" he asked. "Yes," said he. The commandant rejoined, "It cost me a large sum to acquire this citizenship." Paul said, "But it was mine by birth."

Acts of the Apostles 22.25



Bronze military diplomas like this one from Carnuntum, near Vienna, record the grants of citizenship given to auxiliary soldiers who have completed their twenty-five years' service

© Claire Nesbitt

Titus iis, qui militaverunt equites et pedites in alis quattuor et cohortibus decem et tribus I Arvacorum, I civium Romanorum, II Arvacorum, Frontoniana I Alpinorum, I Montanorum, I Noricorum, I Lepidiana, I Augusta Ituraeorum, I Lucensium, I Alpinorum, I Britannico, II Asturum et Callaecorum, II Hispanorum, III Thracum, V Breucorum, VIII Raetorum, quae sunt in Pannonia sub T Atilio Rufo, quinis et vicenis pluribusve stipendiis emeritis dimissis honesta missione, item iis, qui militant in alis duabus I civium Romanorum et II Arvacorum et cohorte VIII Raetorum, et sunt sub eodem, emeritis quinis et vicenis stipendiis, quorum nomina subscripto sunt, ipsis liberis posterisque eorum civitatem dedit et conubium cum uxoribus – cohortis I Montanorum, cui prae est Sex. Nerianus Sex filius Clustumina Clemens, ex peditibus Soioni Muscelli filio, Besso

Titus – to them, who served as cavalry and foot soldiers in four wings of the army and thirteen of the cohorts I of the Arvacorum, I of the citizens of Rome, II of the Arvacorum, [to the –] of Frontianus I of the Alpines, I of the mountainous regions, I of Noricum, I of Lepidus, I of the Augusta Ituraeans I of Luca, I of Apina, I of the Britons, II of Asturia and Gallaeci, II of the Spanish, III of Thracians, V of the Breukoi, VIII of the Roetians who were in Pannonia under T Atilius Rufus to veterans with 25 or more years of military service each were released with honourable discharge, likewise to those, who were soldiers in two wings, Roman citizenship and II Arvacorum and to the cohort VIII of the Raetians, and they are under the same things, veterans with 25 years of military service, whose names are written below, he gave freedom and citizenship to them and their descendants and marriage with wives – to the cohort I of the mountainous regions, whose name is Sextus Nerianus, Sextus Filius, Clustumina Clemens, from the foot soldier Soionus Muscellus . . .

Two things stand out from this passage. The first is the impact that the realization of Paul's citizenship had on his captors and the way it influenced their treatment of him. As a Roman citizen, Paul was protected by Roman law ('*ius civile*') and entitled to a fair trial in Rome. The impression we are left with is that, without his citizenship, Paul would have been considered of lower status, without rights, and would have been flogged without hesitation, perhaps even crucified. The second thing that emerges is an insight into the nature of acquiring citizenship; on the one hand, we have Paul, who tells us citizenship was his by right of birth and, on the other, the commandant, who bought his citizenship, no doubt at a high price.

These are just two of the ways in which citizenship was acquired. Roman citizenship was granted to male children born within the legal marriage of Roman citizens. Freed slaves were given a limited form of citizenship, probably '*Latini*', but the sons of freed slaves were entitled to full citizenship. Individuals could be granted citizenship for acts of outstanding service to Rome, and provinces could be granted citizenship – usually a limited version, such as '*Latini*'.

Full citizenship was often granted to auxiliary soldiers at the end of their military service of twenty-five years. Several military diplomas exist which set out the conditions of the soldiers' retirement. The inscription on the opposite page is from a bronze military diploma from Carnuntum (near modern Vienna); it dates to the first century AD. The inscription lists individuals and their units and states that they are being granted '*Civium Romanorum*' (Roman citizenship) and permission to marry.

There were restrictions on certain citizens; it was a requirement of becoming a legionary soldier that the man was a citizen. Often, men were made citizens during recruitment. The legionaries, however, found themselves restricted in their citizenship; they

were not permitted to marry until their military service ended. If they did marry and have children, the male children would not be recognized as citizens until permission had been granted for the marriage, after discharge from the army. The rights and status of women varied over time; they were entitled to own property, but never enjoyed the rights of full citizenship, were never allowed to vote or to stand for public office.

With citizenship, whether inherited, purchased or granted, peoples from all over the empire, of any race, could rise through the ranks of Roman society. We have evidence for the lives of individuals, like Septimius Severus, who rose to great things although their cultural heritage was not Italian. They were not classified by their nation, their heritage or the colour of their skin; they were citizens of Rome.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Sarah Francis and Dr Patty Baker for translations. I am also grateful to Dr Tom Moore and Dr Divya Praful Tolia-Kelly for their comments on early drafts.

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Tales of the Frontier Project

This project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council with a major research grant under the Landscape and Environment initiative. It commenced in July 2007 and will be completed by September 2009.

Hadrian's Wall is the one of our most evocative and powerful ancient monuments and is the most famous frontier system, materially and culturally, of the Roman empire. The Wall's international significance is secured by a long tradition of scholarly study and its designation as a World Heritage Site.

Since the late sixteenth century, the Wall has provided a major focus for antiquarians and archaeologists, with surveys and excavations providing respected and authoritative knowledge of its structure and chronology. But understanding the sequence of its construction and use is only one chapter in this monument's biography.

During the eighteenth century, the Wall became a tourist attraction and its popularity continues to grow, providing a significant locus for visitors from the United Kingdom and overseas. Like all monuments, the Wall promotes contradictory readings, including ideas of permanence and decay, domination and resistance, stability and mobility.

The Tales of the Frontier project provides an exploration of the significance of the Wall and its landscape as both monument and icon from the time of Severus in the second and third centuries, to that of Bede in the eighth, and through to today's Wall at the time of the Limes Congress in summer 2009.

This frontier has played a critical role in ideas about the origins of 'civilization' and the identities of 'others' and 'self' nations. Its monumentality shaped the work of scholars and understandings of its geopolitical and cultural value have shifted; visitors to this landscape are orientated from north-south (in the past) to east-west (in the present).

The twenty-first century is one of many new territorial borders and physical walls: linear sites retain their power to signify and delimit geographies of citizenship and rule, and form a means of envisioning landscape, territory and empire.

Throughout this project, Professor Richard Hingley, Dr Claire Nesbitt, Dr Robert Witcher and Dr Divya P Tolia-Kelly have developed and published research which lies at the interdisciplinary interfaces between scholarship on the Wall and archaeology, geography, postcolonial theory, history, cultural studies and classics.



<p>Dr Michael A Crang</p> <p>Department of Geography Durham University</p>	<p>Dr Divya Praful Tolia-Kelly</p> <p>Department of Geography, Durham University</p>	<p>Dr Claire Nesbitt</p> <p>Department of Archaeology, Durham University</p>
<p>Dr Crang has worked extensively around landscape, identity and meaning. His work has engaged with museological practices and politics in conserving cultural heritage and its connection with national politics and senses of belonging. He has taken this out to heritage sites and other tourist attractions to unpack how visitors interpret and make sense of places. His current work in this area has been looking at tourism and media in shaping stories about places which has formed part of an edited collection, forthcoming in 2009, 'Cultures of Mass Tourism'.</p>	<p>Dr Tolia-Kelly's research is focused on thinking transculturally about home, citizenship and belonging to landscape. She engages with contemporary theories of materiality, landscape, race, visual cultures and memory. She also has a critical interest in taxonomies of art and culture, and has curated several art exhibitions and published internationally on these themes. Dr Tolia-Kelly currently holds a 'Beacon for Public Engagement' fellowship, awarded by Durham and Newcastle universities, and has a forthcoming book entitled 'Landscape, Race and Memory' to be published by Ashgate Press.</p>	<p>Dr Nesbitt is co-curator of An archaeology of 'race' exhibition developed from the 'Tales of the Frontier' project at Durham University. Her publications during the project have focused on the development of archaeological knowledge on Hadrian's Wall and the diverse ways in which people have experienced the landscape of the Wall. Her expertise is on the use of light in worship in Byzantine churches and she is currently preparing papers developing from her doctoral research. She is a member of the executive committee of the Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies.</p>



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